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ABSTRACT

Many college graduates experience apprehension and anxiety as they move from college to the work place. In this study, differences in the patterns of socialization were compared for graduates from both a non co-op school and a cooperative one. Data analyses were conducted to address five major research questions: (1) What changes does socialization bring across time?; (2) What sources and content domains do newcomers sample to learn more about organizational life?; (3) Who in the organizational setting initiates learning?; (4) How does socialization affect the knowledge level of newcomers?; and (5) What are the assimilation outcomes of the socialization process? The cooperative experience appeared to prepare students better to assume a functional role more quickly in their new organizations than non co-op graduates. Cooperative graduates profited from their cooperative experiences by acquiring more effective learning strategies, accruing greater knowledge, and adjusting to organizational life more effectively. By providing more cooperative internship experiences, universities could better prepare graduates for their first jobs. Similarly, employers would be rewarded for their participation by creating a more qualified applicant pool from which to recruit and select new employees. (RJM)

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Learning The Ropes! Co-ops Do It Faster

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The transition from college to the workplace, like other types of organizational entry, is a time of apprehension and anxiety for many college graduates (Feldman and Brett, 1983; Fisher, 1986). "Learning the ropes," understanding what is expected in terms of job assignments, and "fitting in," finding one's role within the organization, are two descriptions of the process termed organizational socialization. To reduce newcomer anxiety, Wanous (1980) has argued that organizations should provide realistic information (job previews) on job tasks, one's role in the organization and the acceptable level of job performance.

Previous work experiences has also been shown to reduce the uncertainty of entering a new job (Feldman, 1988). While college students often have summer and part-time work experiences, they do not possess a wealth of experience in the type of work environments likely to be encountered after graduation. The exception would be students who have participated in cooperative learning experiences where work corresponds closely to those conditions faced after graduation. In fact, an argument in support of cooperative education suggests that co-op students are more aware of the expectations of the workplace (Wilson, 1987).

Research has shown that co-op students have better clarified career goals, were more confident of their decisions (Weinsteen, 1980; Brown, 1976), and had more realistic job expectations (Brown, 1984). While co-op students felt themselves better prepared for work than non co-op students (Wilson and Lyons, 1961), no study has examined the socialization of cooperative education students and compared their socialization to the socialization of non co-op students. This paper addresses five questions:

1. What changes in socialization occur between organization entry and six months of tenure in the organization?

2. How do newcomers learn about their jobs? Or what sources and content domains (manuels, journals, etc) do newcomers sample?

3. Who in the organization initiates newcomer learning?

4. How does socialization affect the knowledge level of newcomers?

5. What are the assimilation outcomes of the socialization process?

In analyzing these questions, we expected that cooperative education graduates' behavior would differ from non co-op graduates. Using the knowledge they acquired in their co-ops, cooperative graduates would take less time to socialize, use different sources for acquiring information, initiate their own learning, know more about their job, and be better assimilated into the organization.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A NEWCOMER?

During the socialization process newcomers attempt to make sense of their new work environment. Beginning a new job exposes newcomers to a number of uncertainties: What is expected of them on the job, how to deal with coworkers, and what organizational events should be recognized as significant? Through socialization, newcomers begin to cope with these uncertainties by finding out "how things work." Gradually, as they develop an appreciation and understanding of the complexities of their work environment, newcomers learn to interpret and react to organizational features, events, and processes like experienced organizational members and the uncertainty which they initially experienced dissipates.

Why is socialization important? The primary function of the socialization process is to acquaint newcomers with the expectations for their new job and social network. These expectations include learning and adopting the values of their work group and organization and understanding their role in the system. If the socialization process is successful, a worker will quickly assimilate into the workplace, allowing the individual to contribute quickly to the organization. The organization benefits from a well socialized employee through higher employee productivity and a stronger commitment to the company. Newcomers who are quickly assimilated into their roles are thought to have lower stress levels related to their jobs, be more satisfied with their jobs, and generally are more likely to feel a sense of belonging in their new positions than those who are less well adapted.

Socialization theory portrays the socialization process as a series of discrete stages through which a newcomer proceedes until accepted as a full-fledged organization member

( ). Research generally describes these different stages and often suggests what organizations can do to structure the early experiences of newcomers ( ). Little work has examined specifics of the socialization process, such as what newcomers learn about their jobs or how they learn about it. The approach in this study capitalizes on both theory and the learning process (Feldman, 1988) to conceptualize socialization as a process of acquiring knowledge about four elements of the organizational setting: task activities, role behaviors, work group norms and organizational culture.

Elements Of The Organizational Setting

First, newcomers must learn what tasks are required by the new position and how to do them. Some of the first things new employees learn upon assuming a new position are their basic job duties and procedures, what their priorities are, how to handle equipment, how to deal with routine problems, and how to obtain the information and resources needed to meet their responsibilities. Mastery of these task elements is essential for the newcomer to perform his or her job well. Expectations inherent in the new organization role are a second feature of the work environment with which the newcomer must become familiar. Each job, given its level and position in the organization, has associated with it certain expectations about what constitutes appropriate behavior. For example, newcomers must learn when to act alone or seek approval, what is expected of them beyond task performance, to what extent they can modify their duties, and what behavior and demeanor is appropriate for their position. Finding out what these expectations are and fulfilling them is one way that a newcomer begins to "fit into" an organization.

A third important facet of the work context which newcomers must learn are work group norms. Learning how to interact with one's coworkers, understanding the existing work group social structure, and discerning colleagues' expectations for job performance are crucial both in getting one's work accomplished and in building good personal relationships that make the workplace more hospitable. Finally, newcomers must learn about the organizational culture. Understanding the policies, practices, procedures, power structures, and tacit understandings among established organizational members can help new employees make sense of why things

are done as they are. Furthermore, developing an appreciation for organizational myths, mission statements, and values aids newcomers in making sense of their new job context. Overall, organizational newcomers must learn how to perceive, interpret, and respond to features and events in their new setting in ways that are consistent with the framework used by current organizational members.

Along with job content, the issue of how newcomers learn about their new job settings is important in the socialization process. The primary sources newcomers are thought to use in acquiring information about their jobs include mentors, supervisors, coworkers and peers, observation of others, trial and error experimentation, and objective sources such as manuals, training, etc. Within these sources, the value of the information available from each source may vary--different sources can be more or less helpful or, with person sources, be more or less active in initiating information exchange. Therefore, the way in which newcomers obtain information about their new job setting can have a strong influence on how well and how long it takes for them to become fully assimilated into the organization.

THE STUDY

Newcomer socialization is a dynamic process which changes over time. Most socialization is believed to occur during the first few months of a new comer's tenure in an organization. When the process is complete is not so precisely defined; factors involved in this learning are constantly changing, as is their importance in the process. To capture the dynamics of the process, a longitudinal design was selected. During Phase I, data on the four elements and the organizational setting were collected within the first three months the newcomers were in their jobs. Phase II data, tapping into the same items, was collected approximately six months later.

Participants

Participants were recruited from graduating seniors in the engineering and business programs at two educational institutions: a major research university, offering four-year undergraduate degree programs in business and engineering, and a four-year cooperative education institution. Initial contact with these graduates was made through letters requesting

their participation in the study. The only students not contacted were a small group of engineering students from the research university who were participating in a co-op program. Thus all the nonco-op students were from the research university. A total of 496 graduates expressed an interest in this project. Sixty-seven percent (334) returned completed Phase I questionnaires; of these, 219 or 66% returned Phase II questionnaires.

Participants from the cooperative education institution represented 32% of the respondents in both phases. The respondents' mean age was 23 and 57% were male--a proportion which remained stable over both phases. With respect to professional field, 48% were business and 52% were engineers.

Survey Instrument

In order to measure how much newcomers believed they had learned about each of the domains of their work context, how they learned about them, and how they were reacting to the process of adjusting to their new jobs, a survey was developed for administration in both Phase I and Phase II . The major components of the questionnaire are briefly described.

Socialization information acquisition. This measure assessed how much newcomers believed they learned about the task, role, group, and organizational domains from six potential information sources: mentors, supervisors, peers, observation of others, experimentation, and objective references. Using existing socialization literature to identify the important features of each domain (cf. Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986), this measure consisted of 33 items that asked questions about task, role, group, and organizational domains. The task, role, and group domains were assessed by 8 items each, and the organizational domain by 9 items. Respondents were not made aware of the four conceptual domains represented by the items. For each item participants were asked to rate how much information they acquired from each source using a 5-point scale ranging from "a great deal of information (5)" to "no information (1)." Summary scores for this measure were computed by summing the item ratings for each of the four domains by each of the sources. This resulted in a summary score indicating how much information was acquired about the task, role, group, and organization from each potential source.

Proaction. Respondents were asked to indicate who initiated learning activities. This measure addressed overall domains, not specific features, and considered only person sources (mentor, supervisor, coworkers) since impersonal sources, by definition, require newcomer proaction. Participants rated the three personal sources for each domain description using a five-point scale, ranging from "they almost always initiated contact to give me information (5)" to "we initiated contact an equal amount (3)" to "I almost always initiated contact to get information (1)."

Knowledge. Participants were asked to indicate how much they felt they knew about 33 features of their job using a five-point scale, ranging from "a very great amount (5)" to "a very little amount (1)." Scores for this measure were computed by examining respondents' mean knowledge ratings across all items.

Assimilation Outcomes. In order to assess how well new comers were assimilating into their work environments, participants were asked several questions related to their adjustment to their new jobs. Of interest, were their perception of the general adjustment, organizational commitment, stress, performance, commitment, and job satisfaction.

Adjustment - Based on a report by Fisher (1982), respondents were asked to indicate, on a 7-point scale, the extent to which they felt they had adapted to their work situation, were trusted by others, and felt independent.

Organization Commitment - Participants indicated how loyal they felt toward their company by rating on a 7-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with 8 statements describing possible reactions to working for their company (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979).

Stress - Based on an adaptation of scales developed by Caplan (1980), respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they felt symptoms indicating physical stress, such as dizziness, poor appetite, or upset stomach; or psychological stress, such as having trouble getting up in the morning, not feeling qualified for their job, or generally feeling stressed by their job.

Performance - Participants were asked to assess how effective they were in completing their tasks using a 5-point scale. This measure included items such as "How much do you produce compared to others," "How good is the quality of the products or services you produce" and "Compared to other employees doing similar work, how would you rate your overall performance?"

Turnover Intention - Subjects rated on a 7-point scale how often they thought about quitting, whether they were actively looking for a new job, and the probability that they would look for a new job in the next year (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979; Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis, & Cammann, 1982).

Job Satisfaction - Respondents were asked to rate how fulfilled and content they were with various aspects of their jobs, using a five-item scale based on previous work by Louis, Posner, & Powell (1983), Feldman (1976), and Fisher (1982).

FINDINGS

What changes does socialization bring across time?

To address changes across time, t-tests comparing Phase I to Phase II responses were conducted. These analyses yielded few meaningful differences. That is, participants' responses during Phase I did not differ significantly from Phase II responses. This suggests that at the time of the first phase of data collection newcomers had already established their information seeking strategies and patterns of initiation, acquired job and organizational knowledge, and were assimilating into the work environment. Although questionnaires were administered as soon as possible after employment began, most of these data were gathered after newcomers had been on the job for 10 to 16 weeks. This information is valuable because it suggests that newcomers establish patterns of learning very quickly, more quickly than previously considered.

Because no meaningful changes across the six month time lag were detected, Phase I and Phase II responses were averaged to provide more stable and reliable measures. Study participants were divided into non cooperative and cooperative groups for comparisons.

What sources and content domains do newcomers sample?

The prior experience of cooperative graduates was expected to be an asset and enhance the learning process. Results, shown in Table 1, reveal that non co-op graduates used personal sources--mentors, coworkers and supervisors--more frequently than cooperative graduates for all content domains. Non co-op graduates were especially dependent on supervisors for information. Reliance on person sources is probably a result of non co-op graduates' relative lack of work experience, as compared to cooperative graduates. This type of information seeking strategy may be indicative of more insecure and uncertain newcomers. Cooperative graduates evidenced greater self-reliance, generally directing their information seeking toward sources they were likely to control.

Nonco-op graduates also reported greater use of objective referents (manuels) for information from all content domains. This result indicates an inability to differentiate among sources for the one best suited to provide information on a given content domain. For example, information about role and group is not likely to be found in a company training manual, for example. This finding also reveals that non co-op graduates tended to "play by the rules," in that the sources most frequently used by these newcomers are formal and organizationally sanctioned. For information relevant to every content domain, traditional graduates consulted supervisors and objective referents. These sources are most likely to provide organizationally prescribed information and describe things as "they ought to be," rather than how they actually are.

Conversely, the results revealed that cooperative graduates made more frequent use of objective information seeking methods, observation and trial and error. These strategies are more likely to elicit accurate information on how things in the company actually function. The cooperative group most often employed observation for information about the work group and organization, while primarily using trial and error for information related to the task and role domains. This indicates an awareness of which methods are likely to be best to gather specific and realistic information. Cooperative graduates' more substantial amount of work experience is evidenced in this finding. It shows that they have learned what methods are best

suited to acquire those things that will allow them to become acclimated quickly. Cooperative graduates' reliance on more self-reliant strategies also illustrates greater confidence and less need for encouragement and reinforcement from organizational incumbents. The cooperative group entered the organization closer to becoming fully functional than the nonco-op group, at least in terms of their information seeking strategies.

< TABLE 1 HERE >

Who in the organization initiates learning?

Non co-op graduates reported that supervisors more frequently initiated learning about task, role, group and organization. Similarly, nonco-op newcomers also reported that coworkers were more likely to initiate learning about task, role and organization. These results are probably an indication that company personnel viewed nonco-op newcomers as requiring more assistance than cooperative initiates. Supervisors and coworkers recognized the need to take the initiative in educating the nonco-op, possibly naive, graduates. With the experience gained through their cooperative experience, co-op graduates were less likely to be perceived by their supervisor and coworkers as needing assistance.

How does socialization affect the knowledge level of newcomers?

After exploring the process by which newcomers acquired information, analyses were conducted to examine knowledge differences. (Items in each content domain were averaged for these analyses.) In the breakdown comparing the knowledge of cooperative vs. nonco-op graduates, cooperative graduates reported greater knowledge of task and role. This finding is not surprising given this group's greater amount of prior experience and the self-reliant learning strategies they reported. This result exemplifies the value of cooperative education in preparing graduates to become functional organization members more quickly. The finding is also an indication of the superiority of self-reliant information gathering strategies that differentiate among best sources to tap for specific types of knowledge, such as those used by cooperative newcomers.

What are the outcomes of the socialization process?

Between group comparisons were made for the six outcome measures. No significant differences were found between cooperative and non cooperative graduates on four outcomes: stress, performance, turnover and satisfaction. The analysis did reveal that cooperative graduates scored higher on the adjustment scale which suggest co-ops adjusted better to their work environment than non co-ops. This result is consistent with previously discussed findings related to cooperative graduates work experience, learning strategies, and greater job and organizational knowledge. Better prepared newcomers who adopt more successful information gathering techniques experienced greater adjustment.

Nonco-op graduates were more committed to the organization than cooperative graduates. While true commitment is valuable to the organization, nonco-op graduates may simply be more naive than truly loyal. Nonco-op graduates enter their first jobs relatively inexperienced. As they become better adjusted and more knowledgeable their perspectives may become more instrumental in their orientation. That is, they may begin to view the organization as a training ground that will lead to future opportunities, a more realistic perspective for individuals in their very first important job. Co-op students may already hold this view. This finding would be consistent with work by Wilson (1987) and Brown (1984).

SUMMARY

This study was an investigation into the organizational socialization and assimilation processes experienced by college graduates beginning their working careers. Differences in the patterns of socialization were compared for graduates from a non co-op and a cooperative educational institutions. Data analyses were conducted to address five major research questions: a) What changes does socialization bring across time? b) What sources and content domains do newcomers sample to learn more about organizational life? c) Who in the organizational setting initiates learning? d) How does socialization affect the knowledge level of newcomers? e) What are the assimilation outcomes of the socialization process?

Few changes were observed over the time period selected for study. Newcomers learned their job requirements and obtained knowledge of their organization's culture much sooner than the three months often accepted as necessary. With regards to our remaining questions, the results generally supported our hypotheses. Co-op graduates reported using more effective learning techniques, exemplified by the use of a variety of sources and differentiating among them according to the content domain being explored. The effectiveness of these techniques was then evidenced in cooperative students' reports of greater knowledge and adjustment. Non co-op graduates relied on organizationally sanctioned sources and reported more proaction from supervisors and coworkers. The cooperative experience appeared to better prepare students to assume a functional role more quickly in their new organizations. Non co-op graduates entered their new positions relatively more naive and less experienced.

Academic advisors and placement officers at educational institutions can incorporate these results into programs that provide realistic previews of possible job experiences to graduating students. By familiarizing students with the sources of information that will be available to them and match appropriate sources with job tasks and organizational culture, students can initiate themselves more quickly into the work environment. This same information can also be used by co-op coordinators to orient students before they enter their first co-op. First time co-ops are no different than graduating seniors with little work experience.

This probe into the early socialization of graduates into the work place has provided new insights, as well as raised new questions. How many co-op experiences does it take for a student to differentiate information sources and gain socialization skills? A longitudinal study that follows a group of students through their co-op experiences would be required. Does faster socialization in the work place by co-ops result in different career outcomes? By using their own initiative to learn tasks and understand organizational culture, co-op students may gain an advantage in job assignments and promotions. On the other hand, the socialization process may take place so quickly that non co-ops quickly catch-up with their co-op counterparts.

Cooperative graduates profited from their cooperative experiences by acquiring more effective learning strategies, accruing greater knowledge, and adjusting to organizational life more effectively. By providing more cooperative internship experiences, universities could better prepare graduates for their first jobs. Co-op graduates may also be able to establish their long term career success sooner. Similarly, organizations would be rewarded for their participation by creating a more qualified applicant pool from which to recruit and select new employees.

Table 1.
Co-op and Nonco-op Use of Information Sources. Sources Listed Were Used Significantly More Often By This Group.

Type of Information	Source of Information Used By	
	Non Co-op	**Co-op**
TASKS:		
tasks, duties, assignments	Supervisor, Referent	
how to deal with red tape	Referent	Observation, Trial/Error
standard operating procedures	Mentor, Supervisor, Referent	Trial/Error
priority of tasks	Mentor, Coworker, Referent	
how to perform tasks & duties	Coworker, Supervisor	Referent
how to handle problems	Mentor, Supervisor, Referent	
where to obtain information for job	Supervisor, Referent	Trial/Error
how to use equipment or tools for job	Mentor, Supervisor	
ROLE:		
how to fit in company	Supervisor, Referent	Observation
how much can make own rules	Referent	Observation, Trial/Error
when can act alone		
how to act	Coworker, Supervisor, Referent	
what responsibilities are	Referent	Trial/Error
what is expected on job	Referent	
how much can define own tasks	Referent	Trial./Error
how much authority to do job	Referent	Trial/Error

	Non Co-op	Co-op
GROUP:		
how to act & behave in group	Supervisor, Referent	
how to get along with coworkers	Coworker, Supervisor, Referent	
group members with status	Supervisor, Referent, Trial/Error	Observation
role of group in organization	Referent	Observation
how work is done in group	Referent	Observation
group belief re quantity & quality of work	Referent, Observation	
how coworkers feel about job	Referent	Trial/Error
atmosphere of interpersonal relations	Referent, Observation	
ORGANIZATION:		
goals & objectives of organization	Referent, Observation	Trial/Error
who has power in company	Supervisor, Referent, Observation	Trial/Error
organizational policies, procedures, rules	Supervisor, Referent, Observation	Trial/Error
management's beliefs re workers		
norms & values of company	Supervisor, Referent, Observation	
special language of company	Referent, Observation	Trial/Error
channels of authority	Observation	
ropes for getting ahead	Observation	Trial/Error
organizational legends, myths, & stories	Observation	

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